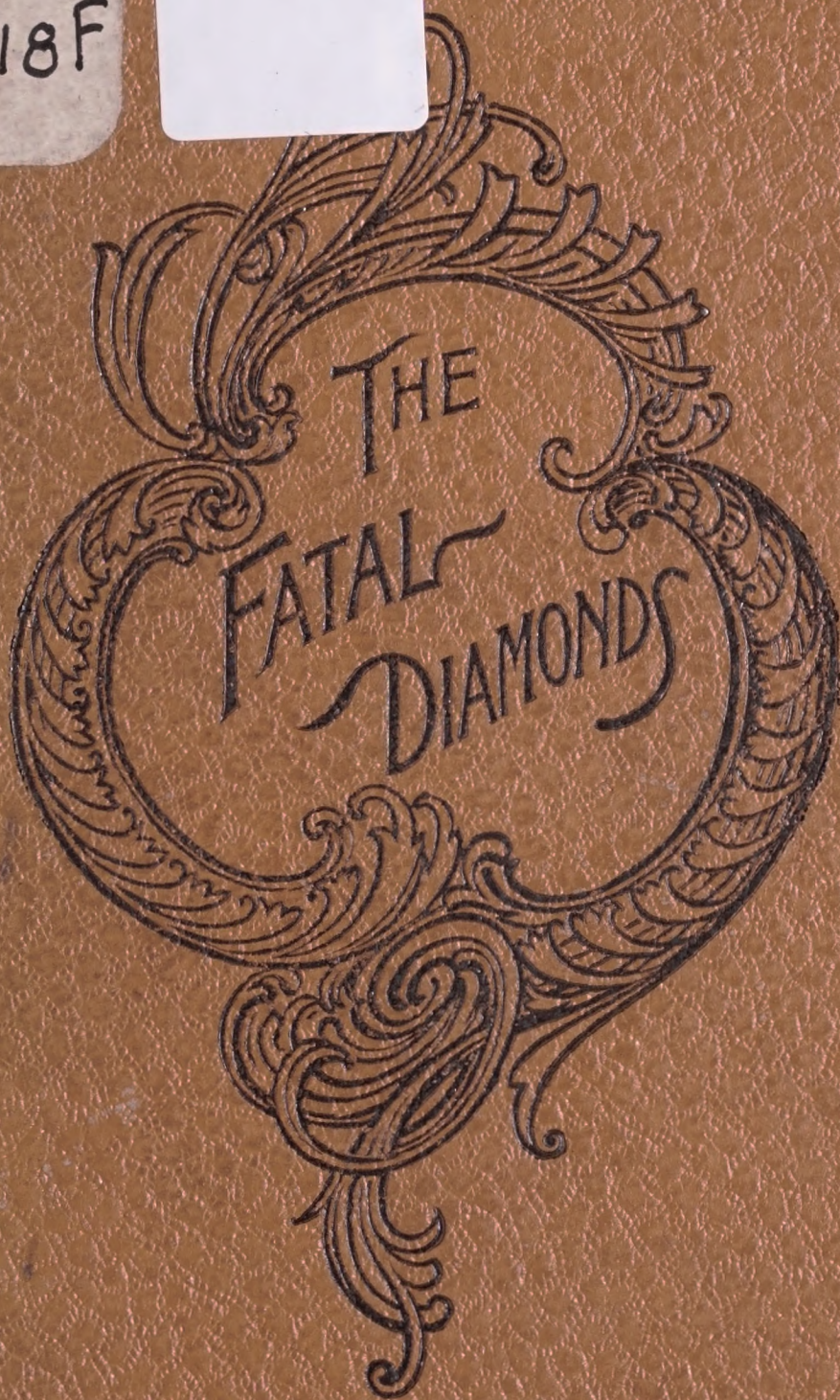


PZ

3

.D718F

FT MEADE
GenColl



LIBRARY OF CONGRESS.

Chap. P73 Copyright No. _____

Shelf 1718 F

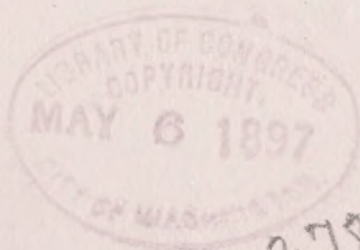
UNITED STATES OF AMERICA.

THE
FATAL DIAMONDS.

BY

ELEANOR C. DONNELLY,

*Author of "Petronilla," "Our Birthday Bouquet,"
etc.*



27810-C²-1

NEW YORK, CINCINNATI, CHICAGO :
BENZIGER BROTHERS,
Printers to the Holy Apostolic See.

1897

PZ 3
D 718 F

BY THE SAME AUTHOR.

PETRONILLA, and Other Stories. 12mo,
\$1.00.

LITTLE COMPLIMENTS OF THE SEASON.
Verses for Namedays, Birthdays, etc.
12mo, *net*, 50 cents.

OUR BIRTHDAY BOUQUET. 16mo, \$1.00.

THE FATAL DIAMONDS.

I.

It had just gone ten o'clock, that cold December morning, up at Wylde-wood.

The tall, old-fashioned timepiece on the great staircase at Dr. Kenrick's was yet vibrating drowsily the last stroke, when the door of Mrs. Kenrick's dressing-room opened, and somebody came in.

It was only Floy, Mrs. Kenrick's quadroon maid, her lithe little figure set off by the gay chintz dress and white ruffled apron, and a French cap

of tulle and red ribbons stuck jauntily upon her dark braids.

The room was very bright, with its rich furniture, the ruddy fire in the low-down grate, and the winter sunshine streaming in through curtains of crimson silk, giving a rosy glow to everything around ; but, for all it was so warm and pleasant, the apartment was silent and tenantless.

A casket of diamonds lay open upon the dressing-table, amid an elegant chaos of perfume bottles, ivory brushes, and other toilet trifles ; and a long ray of sunlight had struck in upon the jewels and made a rainbow of glory upon the polished ceiling above. Over an empty couch was flung a dinner-dress of white silk, and a pair of embroidered slippers lay by the footstool, as if the young mistress

of all this silent splendor had just cast them from her little feet.

The pert quadroon gave a quick glance around the apartment. Then she thrust her hands into the pockets of her white apron, and came and stood by the dressing-table.

She was well accustomed to most of the fine things scattered about, here and there, in such lavish profusion ; but the diamonds were something new.

And rare beauties they were ; a necklace, earrings, and bracelets of the purest water, and worth, Floy thought, a mint of money.

She knew they were Dr. Kenrick's birthday (as well as Christmas) gift to his young wife ; that they had been sent home only an hour ago, and that Mrs. Kenrick was to wear them,

that Christmas Eve, for the first time, at a dinner-party to be given in her honor miles and miles away. Olney was the name of the place, and Floy knew also that it was Mrs. Kenrick's native town, whence the doctor had brought her a bride six months before ; and although it was whispered that she was not to the manor born—"a penniless lass" in fact, without "a lang pedigree"—a very haughty, supercilious bride she had proved to be, as Floy knew to her cost.

It was just like her careless way to go out of her room and leave all those precious things open upon the table.

While the little maid stood thinking this and feasting her eyes upon the jewels, there came a rap at the door which communicated with a private staircase. To open it was to ad-

mit a waiter with a basket of cut flowers in his hands, an exquisite thing, which filled the room with the mingled odors of roses and heliotrope, geranium and japonicas.

The young maid had a tropical thirst for flowers. She took them from the man, turned them about in her hand, her eyes sparkling through their jetty lashes, as she thrust her little nose among the leaves, and inhaled their perfume.

But the waiter was differently occupied.

He was a mulatto, tall and well made, but with a beardless, treacherous face.

Instead of departing as soon as his errand was done, he lingered near the girl, and, unobserved by her, was watching silently and hungrily the

jewels exposed upon the dressing-table. His small black eyes glistened like a ferret's, his lips and fingers trembled with an odd, convulsive motion. He was even prepared to draw closer to the casket; but just then an angry voice was heard in the distance, and the man disappeared through the door by which he had entered, just as a bell rang sharply across an opposite passage.

Down went the basket of flowers on the table, and off darted Floy with the casket of diamonds.

Across the corridor she ran in hot haste, and lifting a heavy velvet curtain from an open door, she entered a spacious sitting-room, furnished with a simplicity which was almost severe.

A large ivory crucifix hung above the oaken mantel-shelf, and a marble

statuette of the Madonna was on a bracket in a bow-window, where some choice flowers were growing in pots and a canary was singing in its gilt cage.

In front of the open fire sat a noble-faced old lady in a quaint, old-time gown of dove-colored merino, and a cap of clear muslin upon her snowy hair.

This was Mrs. Ursula Kenrick, the doctor's gentle old mother.

Her sweet brown eyes were fixed with a troubled gaze upon a tall, elegant young creature who stood near her on the hearth-rug, attired in the extreme of fashion. A singularly beautiful girl, with a profusion of yellow hair and a brilliant complexion ; but just now her cheeks were flushed more than was becoming,

there was an angry light in her blue eyes, and a sullen pout upon her delicate lips.

This was Mrs. Margery Kenrick, the doctor's wilful young wife.

She was twirling a slip of paper impatiently in her long, taper fingers. It was a telegram, and contained these words :

“ The case is such a critical one, I shall not be able to return until to-morrow. Am grieved to disappoint Margery this evening, but hope to keep the Christmas with her at home.

“ LEWIS KENRICK.”

An old patient, a merchant of high standing, was very ill in the adjoining town of Elton, and Dr. Kenrick had been summoned to his bedside the night before. At noon he was expected back to accompany his wife

to the dinner-party, miles away at Olney ; and here, at ten o'clock, had come this telegram instead, and Margery Kenrick was vexed beyond all reason.

She had been such a spoiled and petted darling ever since her marriage, that she had come to chafe against the least crossing of her naturally strong will, and rebelled passionately against this first real obstacle to the course of her gay pleasures.

To be cheated out of her birthday party, to be robbed of the golden opportunity of displaying her new jewels and all the rest of her festive finery to her dear five hundred friends at Olney (which she had not visited since she quitted it a bride), all because some stupid old Eltonian saw fit to consider himself dangerously

ill, and detain Lewis at his bedside—it was insufferable, and could not be borne. Nay, it *should* not be borne.

The wilful beauty beat the point of her dainty slipper upon the rug, and formed in her heart a desperate resolve.

“These are the diamonds,” she said ungraciously, as she motioned Floy to place the open casket in the elder lady’s hands.

The grave old eyes were graver still as they gazed down almost sadly upon the sparkling gems.

“They are very beautiful,” she said gently, “very beautiful, indeed ; and Lewis will be sorry enough, dear boy, when he knows that you have been disappointed in the first wearing of them this evening, Margery.”

A disagreeable expression passed

over the young wife's face. She took the casket almost rudely from the old lady's hands, and closed the lid on the jewels with a vicious snap.

"I do not intend to be disappointed," she answered shortly ; adding to the maid : "Floy, you may go now, and put my dinner-dress and laces, with the rest of the things, into the small trunk ; and don't forget my gloves and fan ; and see that the carriage is ready to take me to the railway station after luncheon."

As the curtain dropped upon the quadroon the old lady said pleadingly :

"Margery, dear daughter, you surely do not mean it ? You will not go to Olney without your husband ?"

"Why not ?" was the sharp reply.

“Why should I stay at home and mope? It is my birthday, and this dinner is to be given in honor of the day by those who truly love me. If Lewis cares so little for me and my friends as to sacrifice both to the whims of some whining old hypochondriac——”

“Margery! Margery!” remonstrated the mother, “do not be unjust to our dear one. You well know how tenderly, how devotedly he loves you. Nothing but the call of sacred duty could ever keep him from your side.”

The soft old eyes were moist with tears.

“To purchase for you *these*,” and she laid her hand upon the jewels, “he sacrificed the darling hope and plan of years—that of building a new

wing to the old Charity Hospital at Elton.”

A sudden chill struck through the hot blood of the excited girl who listened. She shuddered visibly and became very pale. Was it a premonition of coming evil? For the moment it seemed to her as if the casket she held in her cold fingers was filled, not with diamonds, but with the crystallized tears of the myriad poor whom the gratification of her inordinate vanity had deprived of succor and shelter in their hour of bitter need and suffering.

“Dear child,” said the old lady, seeing, but somewhat misunderstanding, her daughter-in-law’s sudden emotion, “when you came to me a while ago I had just finished reading those sweet words of the solemn, wise

epistle to Christian wives, ‘whose adorning,’ it says, ‘let it not be the outward plaiting of the hair, or the wearing of gold, or the putting on of apparel ; but the hidden man of the heart in the incorruptibility of a quiet and a meek spirit, which is rich in the sight of God. For,’ it adds, ‘after this manner heretofore also the holy women, hoping in God, adorned themselves, being subject to their own husbands.’ ”

The blood mounted hotly to the young wife’s temples.

Those words, “being subject to their own husbands,” chafed her independent spirit ; and the glance she gave Mrs. Ursula was so fierce and defiant, that the latter murmured soothingly :

“But we will say no more, dear

Margery. God knows I have no wish to curb or control your actions, without an eye to your true happiness. But, I am sure, when you think better of it, you will not go alone to Olney, to-day."

Mrs. Margery Kenrick made answer quickly, in a raised key, and in a voice shrill with passion :

"No matter what the consequences may be, I am determined to go, alone, to Olney this afternoon !"

And, turning, she quitted the apartment with angry abruptness. In doing so she ran against some one standing in the corridor just outside the hanging curtain—some one who had been pressing his ear to a slit in the drapery and listening eagerly to the dialogue just finished.

It was Arnold, the mulatto waiter.

“What are you doing here, sir?” she questioned haughtily. “I dismissed you some hours ago.”

The man looked at her with a very ugly expression on his olive face.

She had, indeed, discharged him from service that morning for some trifling offence; and he hated her most cordially for it.

And not for that alone.

His wife, Daphne, had been lady's maid for years to Mrs. Ursula Kenrick, and had recently lost her place through the arbitrary interference of this new queen of the household. So exacting and overbearing were her ways, to be sure, that the servants all fretted under her rule, and wondered among themselves how the grave, gentle Dr. Kenrick (so like his dear, placid old mother) could ever

have mated with such a haughty, hot-headed bride.

Arnold, the waiter, was secretly a man of violent passions—a dangerous man, in fact, whose past (it was whispered among his fellow-servants) had been stained by many a dark and desperate deed.

He and his wife had been the special victims of their young mistress' bad temper and spleen ; and after Daphne had been driven from her place Mrs. Margery had persistently refused to grant her the "character" necessary to secure her another situation.

And now Daphne's husband was literally thirsting for revenge.

"I came, madam," he replied, "to see if you wished me to remain until after luncheon was served," his fer-

ret eyes scanning her, as he spoke, through their half-closed lids.

“I wish you to leave the house at once,” was the scornful retort.

“It shall be as you say, madam ;” and the man, whose manner and speech had a certain indescribable elegance and polish, made her a bow worthy of a courtier to his queen. But he went away down the passage with that ugly expression on his face, muttering to himself : “It shall be, indeed, as you say, young madam ; but *you* shall pay dear for it all, my lady, in the hour of reckoning !” And then, stealthily and unobserved, he slipped into one of his master’s private rooms at the other end of the corridor, and being assured that the apartment was tenantless, he noiselessly turned the key upon himself.

From an antique wardrobe in the corner he proceeded at once to take a complete suit of Dr. Kenrick's best clothing and linen, extracted some of the doctor's gloves and handkerchiefs, as well as some of his cards from a drawer at hand, and adding a velvet travelling-cap and handsome cloth ulster, which had just been sent home, tied the whole rapidly into a neat bundle.

That done, he drew from his pocket a false beard, glossy and flowing, which, pausing before the cheval-glass, he appended for a few moments to his chin, and laughed quietly to himself, noting the effect and the complete change it made in his face.

When he had replaced the artificial hair in his pocket he carried his bundle to a window which looked upon a

thick belt of evergreens in a secluded part of the grounds.

This he opened softly, and with a low whistle and a whispered, "Hist, Daphne!" he dropped the bundle upon the grass below. He waited until a dark-faced woman crept out of the shadow of the firs, and, with an upward glance and a nod, concealed the bundle under her shawl. And when she had disappeared in the shrubbery he closed the window, unlocked the door of the room, and went away as noiselessly as he had entered.

Meanwhile, his young mistress had passed into her dressing-room very much out of sorts, and found Floy cuddled up in a little heap on the floor before the fire, rocking to and fro, and bemoaning herself most pitifully.

The girl had given her ankle a sudden twist and sprained it badly.

Mrs. Kenrick sank into an easy-chair, disgusted and despairing.

She had reckoned, at least, on taking her maid with her on this ill-starred journey to Olney, and here was the wretched little creature unable to put her foot under her, or even to help with the necessary preparations for the journey. Everything seemed to be going wrong.

Margery Kenrick looked into the blazing fire in the open grate, and her eyes glowed like the hot coals. If she had looked as long and as well into the fiery recesses of her own unbridled passions, they would have been dimmed and drenched with tears of contrite repentance, for she would

have seen in that interior scrutiny that all her annoyances sprung from her inordinate pride and vanity, from the wilful neglect of her religious and social duties.

It was the vigil of Christmas, a solemn fast of the Church, and she was bent on a headstrong attendance at a grand festive dinner.

Her gentle husband had said to her when the cards first came from Olney : “ Would it not be better, love, to keep at home with mother this first Christmas of our wedded lives ? Think how sweet it would be to approach together the holy communion in our own little Wyldewood chapel ! ”

With the recollection of these words, the recollection of some others and more recent ones flashed suddenly upon her.

The telegram was still crumpled in the grasp of her slender hand.

She straightened the slip of paper out upon her knee, and read the message over once more :

“ The case is such a critical one, I shall not be able to return until to-morrow. Am grieved to disappoint Margery this evening, but hope to keep the Christmas with her at home.”

“ ‘ *Hope to keep the Christmas with her at home* ’ ! ” She repeated the last words to herself with bitter emphasis.

“ It is all a preconcerted thing,” she murmured angrily ; “ he did not want to go to Olney from the first, and now he has trumped up this shallow excuse to have his own way and keep me at home ! ”

Her mind was made up.

The great clock on the staircase was chiming the hour of noon. Floy had managed to cripple off to her own apartment.

Mrs. Kenrick rang the bell and ordered the chambermaid, who appeared at the summons, to complete the packing of her trunk, and serve her with lunch in an adjoining room.

An hour later, attired in her costly sealskins, the diamonds flashing in her delicate ears, the young wife lifted the curtain at Mrs. Ursula's door to say adieu.

The old lady was like an antique picture, beautiful and touching to behold.

She was in her high-backed chair, her head resting against its cushions, and her eyes closed in a gentle sleep ;

but a tear trembled upon her soft old cheek, and the hand upon her knee still grasped her rosary of pearl. Sleep had surprised her in the midst of her fervent prayers for the wilful girl whose unhappy temper had so often, since her coming, darkened the sunshine of her son's peaceful home.

At this vision of meek and venerable holiness something like remorse stirred in the bosom of the one for whom those loving prayers had been offered.

It was the last pleading murmur of the good angel before he spread his snowy pinions and fled away into the gathering darkness ; but it was rejected on the instant, and Margery Kenrick pressed obstinately on to the hour and scene of a terrible retribution.

II.

SHE was alone in the palace-car *en route* for Olney.

She had ensconced herself in the depths of a luxurious easy-chair, her drapery of garnet silk so gracefully adjusted as to display the dainty little foot upon the footstool. The dark sealskin cap afforded a strong relief to the blond braids on which it rested, and set off to striking advantage the clear rose and white of a peerless complexion.

Her blue eyes rested complacently upon an exquisite little satchel of painted satin which lay in her lap, its slender gold chain wrapped carelessly around her gloved wrist.

Save and except the diamonds in her ears, the rest of her precious brilliants had found a hiding-place in that little satin bag.

It was not in her nature to be over-careful about anything; but these were certainly rare jewels; and, as she had said to her mother-in-law that morning, they would be safer in the hand than they could possibly be in a trunk. Trunks might be lost or mislaid or robbed, but nothing could happen to *her*, she thought, strong and defiant in the inexperience of her reckless and beautiful youth.

She gave the chain another twist around her hand; and, remembering that it was yet a good three hours' ride to Olney, she bought a book (a trifling tale) from the newsboy, and, settling herself more comfortably

among her cushions, began to turn the pages of the translated French novel.

Thus occupied, taking in, without a scruple, the poisonous imagery, the false and seductive sophisms of the romance before her, the last vestige of her uncomfortable self-reproach melted away.

In short, so blinded was the selfish beauty to her own pride and bad temper, so keenly alive to the sense of her fancied wrongs, that she even began to regard herself in the light of a much-abused individual, who, by the laws of compensation, was entitled, after all that she had undergone, to the lion's share of enjoyment in the delights of the approaching festivities.

The most charming visions began

to float between her eyes and the printed follies of the page they were perusing. In the invisible mirror which the spirit of Vanity held towards her, she seemed to see herself arrayed in the white silk dinner-dress (now lying safely at the bottom of her trunk), with its elaborate garniture of seed-pearls and rich old creamy lace ; the precious diamonds sparkling like dew-drops on her throat and arms ; and their envied wearer entrancing the fashionable assembly with the corresponding brilliancy of her *jeux d'esprit* and after-dinner coruscations.

So absorbed was the prospective belle of Olney in the false illusions of her French novel, and still falser illusions of her own ambitious fancy, that she did not notice the two gen-

tllemen who sat just behind her in the luxurious car, and who were watching her every movement with something livelier than the casual curiosity of mere fellow-travellers.

Of the personal appearance of one of these curious gentlemen it does not concern us to say more than that he was a plain, slender person of uncertain age ; of a nervous, awkward manner ; and, despite his dark skin and fiercely twisted mustache, of a decidedly effeminate face.

His companion, on the contrary, was a tall, elegant man in the prime of life, with a full, flowing, glossy beard, which, like his hair and lashes, was of a purple black. He wore a handsome cloth ulster and a dark velvet travelling-cap, and was faultlessly gloved and shod.

His small, penetrating black eyes, it is true, had a quick, restless motion, right and left, which was calculated to produce an unpleasant impression of distrust ; but he and his friend were possibly Spaniards, both being of markedly olive complexion.

They had entered the palace-car just after Mrs. Lewis Kenrick had ensconced herself in that inviting easy-chair wherein she was now poring over her novel, and they had evidently chosen their seats with a view to her close proximity.

The handsome man with the beard had expressed his whispered satisfaction to his homely companion as they divested themselves of their wraps and dropped into their chairs, and after settling a large valise at his feet, he had straightway devoted

himself to watching closely, over the top of a newspaper, the movements of the unconscious girl before him. In truth, the singular eagerness of his gaze whenever Mrs. Kenrick's face turned towards the car-window, surveying for the moment the wintry landscape outside, and giving him, at the same time, a clear view of her fair, regular profile, the sort of hungry, fierce satisfaction which seemed to leap out of his small, restless eyes had something quite repulsive in its disagreeable intensity.

It was Christmas eve, and the weather very cold and beginning to threaten snow. Besides Mrs. Kenrick and the two men, there were no other passengers in the compartment except an aristocratic-looking old gentleman who was seated in their

rear, and who had just awakened from a delicious nap over the *London Times* to inform the conductor that he was an English traveller who was making, for the first time, the grand tour of Northern America.

The remark was overheard by the more vigilant and more elegant of the two Dons in front, and, simple as it was, it seemed to afford him a singular pleasure. He smiled and stroked his long, silky beard, and whispered approvingly to the companion beside him.

The smile, however, had vanished the next instant, and a little dumb show took place between the dark gentleman and the conductor.

The former had passed the latter his companion's ticket, and then he tendered him *two* other tickets, indi-

cating by a silent gesture that one was his own, and the other that of the lady who sat before him.

The pantomime was concluded by a nod towards the unconscious Margery, a melancholy shake of the traveller's head, and a significant tapping of his finger upon his dark forehead.

The little stir behind her aroused Mrs. Kenrick from her book.

Looking over her shoulder she saw the conductor, and suddenly remembered that she must produce her ticket.

She was not accustomed to travel alone. She extracted her dainty little pocketbook from her satchel, and searched hurriedly through its contents.

The ticket was not there, neither was it in the satchel itself.

How odd, and how annoying ! She had certainly purchased it awhile ago at the station window, but with a blush at her own carelessness she concluded she must have dropped it in passing from the ticket-office to the car.

She must buy another. The conductor had gone past her without any comment, but she called him back and offered him the money, telling him that she had lost her ticket.

She was surprised to see the official turn his eyes from her with an inquiring gaze, and look meaningly at some one beyond her.

“ It is all right, madam,” he said, in a soothing, conciliating way, which astounded and angered her ; “ the gentleman there, your friend, has already attended to your ticket.”

“What gentleman? what friend?” she questioned hotly, in her intense and proud astonishment; and then, looking behind her, saw, for the first time, the person he indicated.

“This is an outrage!” she cried, with her cheeks aflame. “Conductor, I do not know this man at all! I am travelling entirely alone.”

The old English traveller in the corner peered through his gold-rimmed glasses with an expression of supreme disgust at this situation (so unusual in a first-class carriage), and frowned openly at the usages of American society which permitted so young and beautiful a woman to travel “entirely alone.”

Meanwhile, the dark-bearded gentleman had drawn the conductor's ear close to his lips, and whispered,

but loud enough to be heard by all :

“ She is my wife, poor girl ! hopelessly deranged for months past. My brother and I are taking her to Lethe for special treatment.”

Lethe was a large private asylum for the insane, a couple of stations ahead.

For a moment Margery Kenrick was mute with rage.

She had risen to her feet. She became deadly pale, and the pupils of her eyes dilated till those blue orbs seemed changed to black. A slight froth rose upon her lips.

“ It is all right, madam,” reiterated the conductor, alarmed at her looks, and dreading an immediate outbreak of the supposed mania.

“ It is *not* all right !” she screamed,

losing at once all control of herself. "It is all wrong, all false and outrageous! Conductor, I will have you reported for this. I am Mrs. Lewis Kenrick; see!"—and she produced one of her cards from her pocketbook—"and this insolent man is——"

"Dr. Lewis Kenrick, your husband, poor darling!" said the dark gentleman coaxingly, also producing a card which bore that name. "The worst feature of her mania," he whispered aside to the official; "very distressing!" and he sighed deeply.

"This man is *not* my husband; I swear it, conductor!" she cried, beginning to grow wild and bewildered. "My husband is Dr. Lewis Kenrick, of Wyldewood, and he is now in Elton visiting a dying patient. That was the reason he could not come

with me to Olney, for it is to Olney I am going, conductor, and not to Lethe. If I had not unfortunately lost my ticket, you could see for yourself."

The conductor was puzzled. He was a new hand on the road, and knew none of the prominent residents of the vicinity. The lady was very beautiful, and seemed in great distress. He appealed to the old Englishman in the corner.

"They seem to be vulgar people," said the old aristocrat, sniffing the air with disdain; "but if that fellow is not her husband, why the deuce doesn't she telegraph to the one that *is*, and get him to identify her? Poh!"

The train was slowing up to the station.

“If you will give me the address of the sick person in Elton, madam,” said the conductor, coming back to the now frightened girl, “I will telegraph to inquire if Dr. Kenrick is there.”

“Yes, yes!” she cried eagerly, and then paused in blank consternation.

The Spanish-looking traveller rubbed his gloved hands softly together, and nodded again significantly at the official.

In her excitement she had forgotten that she did not really know the name of her husband’s patient.

All she did know was the name of the Elton hotel where Dr. Kenrick was accustomed to stop.

Would a telegram there reach him in time?

She wrung her slender hands in an agony of apprehension.

The train had reached the station. The early winter twilight was beginning to fall as the conductor gave the clerk the telegram Margery had dictated, addressed to the Elton hotel, with instructions to forward the answer at once to Lethe.

Then, on with a shriek steamed the locomotive into the cold, gray shadows, fitting emblems of the chill darkness beginning to settle relentlessly down upon one wilful woman's troubled heart and life.

She could no longer sit at her ease and dream her vain and selfish dreams. A hectic spot burned in each of her fair cheeks as she paced up and down the narrow passage of the car, clenching her hands and bit-

ing her fevered lips, till she looked, indeed, the mad, restless creature she was so cruelly said to be.

What could all this terrible mystery be? Who was this strange enemy who, even now, while affecting sleep in his chair, was watching her stealthily but closely through his half-open lids? What was his object in playing out to its end this bold and hazardous game?

The conductor had lighted the lamp above his head, and she scanned the dark face more narrowly.

Surely she had seen before (and recently) those small, evil eyes; that expression of vengeful and treacherous hate! Another face—was it at Wyldewood?—dark also, and treacherous, but beardless.

She shuddered, she began to sob

passionately as the conviction of her own utter helplessness burst upon her. Oh, why had she slighted the gentle mother's advice, and started alone on this fatal journey !

“ *No matter what the consequences may be,*” she had said in her bitter anger. And now she would have given every one of the precious jewels in her grasp to be back once more in the safe retreat of home, kneeling at Mrs. Ursula's feet in the warm, bright sitting-room, and listening gratefully to one of those grave, tender homilies she had so often despised as tedious and impertinent.

Like a cool, calm picture in the frame of her excited fancy, she saw again in spirit the crucifix above the mantel-shelf, the Madonna on the wall, and the sweet-faced old lady

asleep by the fire in her high-backed chair, the rosary shining in her withered hand.

“Oh, Blessed Mother Mary!” she prayed, with an intensity of fervor never felt before, “comfortress of the afflicted, refuge of sinners, hear and help your unworthy child!”

A long, sharp whistle sounded on the frosty air. A voice shouted “Lethe!”

The lights of the trim station loomed in view. The trees slid past the windows like pictured things on the slide of a magic lantern. There was a rattle, a grinding rumble, a jolt, which threw her against a hand which grasped and held her like a vice, and the train had stopped at the dreaded station.

A faintness began to creep over

her. As in a troubled dream, or under the oppression of a nightmare, Margery Kenrick felt that the supreme moment of her life had come.

She sank into a seat, still in the grasp of that iron hand. The conductor's voice seemed to come to her from some far-off depths as he bent over her, saying :

“ There is no answer to your telegram, madam.”

Then she was conscious that another face, darker and more evil, full of a suppressed and hideous vengeance, bent close to hers, and hissed at her through its clenched teeth a terribly significant echo :

“ *No answer to your telegram, madam !*”

In that brief instant she recognized her foe

With a ringing shriek, “Arnold, Arnold! I know you at last!” she sprang from the chair, tottered blindly forward, with her hand to her head, and fell prone in a dead faint at his feet.

“You see she recognizes me, poor dear!” said the dark gentleman softly; “but she calls me by my brother’s name. Arnold” (turning to his companion), “help me support our afflicted darling to the carriage. So! It is better as it is—better as it is. Our sad task is easy while she remains insensible. Conductor, please put off this lady’s trunk upon the platform and call yonder cab. Gently, gently” (as they bore her carefully to the door). “Here is her pretty little satchel. Sweet pet! Slip it safely into the

valise, Arnold. The cold air will soon revive her. Thanks, conductor. Now we are all right !”

And clasping to his breast the limp, inanimate mass of sealskins and garnet silk, with the blond head and the beautiful, deathlike face lying like a broken lily on his shoulder, the supposed Dr. Kenrick shut himself and his companions into the carriage in waiting, and was driven off, bag and baggage, down the dark road leading to the Lethe Asylum.

III.

THE gray dawn of the Christmas morning stole into a ground-floor chamber of a fine old mansion on the outskirts of Elton, wherein had, all night long, been fought a silent but desperate battle between Life and Death.

Life had conquered, but at such terrific odds that the grinning skeleton with the scythe seemed yet to linger by the bedside, crying out in hollow tones, "Your triumph is but short-lived!" as his fleshless finger pointed jeeringly at the cadaverous face of the victor, lying spent and wasted among the pillows.

The crisis of the disease was past, however, and the sick man had sunk into a profound and healing slumber.

With a sigh of relief Dr. Lewis Kenrick arose from the chair of a sleepless vigil, and, with an assuring nod to the nurse, who had just returned to her post after a brief repose, he stepped noiselessly to the window and looked out upon the wintry town.

It had snowed heavily in the night, but the dawn was clear and promising. The Christmas chimes were ringing merrily from the belfry of a church some blocks away.

A rosy light was beginning to glow in the east, and a large, fair star hung tremblingly there, like a dying lamp.

“Oh, star of Bethlehem! sweet

star of Bethlehem !” murmured the doctor softly under his breath ; and just then a little child came gayly up the street, singing the dear old “ *Adeste Fideles* ” in a quavering little voice, very tender and touching to hear.

The doctor’s eyes, so like his mother’s brown and placid eyes, grew moist with unshed tears.

He was a big, brave, bearded man, with auburn hair and a fresh complexion ; strong, wise, and skilful, as became a master in his art, but at the same time gentle and pure and simple-hearted as a child.

Looking up now into the cloudless expanse above him, with the tender prayer of Tennyson’s *St. Agnes*,

“ Make Thou my spirit pure and clear
As are these frosty skies,”

he made reverently upon himself the sign of the cross, and gave thanks to the great Physician for the life He had seen fit to give back to the sick man, that peaceful hour, through the ministry of His grateful servant's hands.

Then he dropped the curtain and came back to the nurse.

"I am going now," he said, in a quiet voice.

"How long will this sleep last?" questioned the woman, nodding towards the white face among the pillows.

"Possibly for hours. When he wakes give him the drops yonder and the beef-tea. All he needs now is careful feeding and nursing."

The nurse followed him into the hall.

“Don’t you want some breakfast, doctor, before you go?”

He shook his head.

“Not even a biscuit or a cup of coffee?”

“No, thank you, nurse. It is Christmas morning, remember, and I shan’t break my fast for an hour yet, if I can help it.”

The woman was an Irish Catholic. She smiled understandingly, and murmured a blessing on him as he passed down the stairs and out into the street.

He walked briskly on, block after block, feeling how good it was, after his long vigil in a close sick-room, to drink in deep draughts of that pure, elastic air and crunch the fresh snow under his rapid tread.

A flood of light and sacred song

suddenly poured on him from the open door of a church.

He went in with the silent throng of worshippers hastening to one of the Aurora Masses.

Near the entrance a priest in cassock and stole sat at a latticed screen hearing confessions.

This was the opportunity Dr. Kenrick had desired.

Grave and recollected, he knelt at once in the line of penitents, rich and poor, gentle and simple, reverently waiting alike their turn for holy absolution.

How warm and bright and peaceful was the holly-wreathed house of God! The pungent odor of the greens and the sweet aroma of the altar incense mingled gratefully together.

“How lovely are Thy tabernacles, O Lord of hosts !” thought Dr. Kenrick ; “ my soul longeth and fainteth for the courts of the Lord !”

And then he fell to wishing most fervently that Margery, his young wife, were kneeling there at his side, sharing the solemn delights of that early Christmas morning.

Possibly, at the same time (he consoled himself with the thought) she and the dear old mother were adoring the divine Babe of Bethlehem in the little chapel at Wyldewood. “ God bless and keep them both !” prayed the loving, tender heart.

A half hour passed. The great, bearded man knelt with the throng of devout communicants at the sacred rail, and, with tearful eyes, received from the hands of the priest that In-

carnate God whose altar shall be unto the end of time truly a *Bethlehem*, truly a *House of Bread*, yea, of the Bread of Life which cometh down each day from heaven !

The sun was well up, and the earth rejoicing in her Christmas mantle of unspotted ermine, when Dr. Kenrick came out of the church and made his way to the Elton hotel for breakfast.

He had finished his coffee, and was just about drawing towards him one of the morning papers, when the office clerk approached him.

“ *This* came for you last evening,” he said, “ but we did not know where to find you ;” and he passed on, leaving a telegram in Dr. Kenrick’s hand.

Walking into the reading-room, the doctor tore open the envelope. He

read it at first mechanically, not taking in all its real meaning. Then, with a start and a shudder which shook his strong frame from head to foot, his eye ran wildly again over the mysterious message :

“ Margery ! my wife—on the road to Olney—*in danger !* ” fell in broken words from his lips.

He crushed the paper in his nervous grasp, standing transfixed with astonishment and anguish.

Merciful Heaven ! what could it all mean ? Was some one playing a trick on him ? Or had the child really persisted in going to Olney without him, and had some misfortune——

He clapped his hand to his reeling head. The blood surging to his temples seemed to blind him.

Unworthy as she was (it was one of those incongruities, so singular in their essence, so common in their daily occurrence), this grave, gentle, noble-hearted man loved tenderly, devotedly, with all the strength of his simple nature, the proud, passionate, frivolous girl who bore his name.

And this woman whom he loved ! Oh, pitying angels ! this wife of his bosom, his precious, golden-haired darling, had called to him for aid hours ago, from the depths of some far-off, unknown peril, and no answer had been made to her wild appeal.

Six—eight—ten hours ago—was it now *too late* ?

The cold sweat stood in great beads upon his brow ; but with a wordless prayer to God for help, for direction,

in this supreme emergency, Dr. Kenrick threw himself into a carriage at the hotel door, and was borne rapidly away to the rescue.

* * * * *

“There go the church bells, Rosie, asthore ! Isn’t it swate and beautiful they sound (glory be to God !), and everything so cold and dark and dismal about us ! It’s Heaven’s mercy it stopped snowin’ afore midnight.”

“You may well say that same, Peter Finnegan. Have you the lantern, man ? Take care of that broken bit of wall by the outhouse, and hurry along, or it’s late we’ll be for the midnight Mass, I’m thinking.”

“Hark !” cried the man, “what’s that ? I hear a sound close by.”

“Tut, tut !” returned his wife ;

“don’t loither. Sure, it’s only the wind moaning through the little wood beyant.”

“It’s no wind at all, at all, Rosie Finnegan,” disputed the lantern-bearer. “It’s a groan it is, as I’m a livin’ man! Hist! there it goes agin. Faix, it’s the voice of a human craythur, and no mistake, and somebody’s in distress in the outhouse.”

The worthy couple (who belonged to the force of hired help at the Lethe Insane Asylum, and were now making their way across its extensive grounds to midnight Mass at an adjoining church) pushed open the door of the outhouse and stepped in.

Peter Finnegan flashed his lantern around the interior of the old shed, used for the storage of gar-

den tools, and not far from the public road.

He and his wife gave vent to a simultaneous cry of surprise and horror.

Stripped of her outer garments, bound hand and foot to a rickety old bench, on which she lay at full length, they beheld a beautiful, fair-haired lady, who was moaning and shivering most piteously in the piercing cold of the December night.

Her linen and underwear, they saw at a glance, were of the finest quality. Her lips were blue, her delicate features pinched and drawn; her face and hands as white and almost as cold as the snowdrifts which had blown in during the storm through the broken window of the shed, and lay, like tufts of ermine, upon her lovely hair.

“God save us !” cried Peter, “it’s kilt the poor colleen is, entirely, with the black frost. And her as purty and shapely itself as a wax doll. Mebbe she’s one of the craythurs from the house, yander. She’s give them the slip, and some villain of a tramp has robbed her of her clothes. Lend a hand, Rosie, dear.”

And in less time than it takes to tell it the good fellow had whipped out his pocket-knife, cut the cords which bound the unhappy stranger, and, with the aid of his strong-armed wife, was bearing her across the snowy fields to the asylum.

Poor Margery Kenrick ! Poor, wilful Margery Kenrick !

“How hath the gold become dim ; how is the finest color changed !”

Cold, senseless, stripped of all the

vain ornaments so precious to her heart, indebted for her very life to a poor Irish couple, whose services she would have scorned in the heyday of her pride and passion, the haughty woman whom God had humbled was carried over the threshold of a mad-house, and welcomed, as a vagrant, to its walls.

She was put to bed at once and restoratives applied. Before an hour had elapsed there was no crazier creature in that vast abode of crazy misery than the hapless wife of Dr. Lewis Kenrick.

Delirium had supervened upon the exposure and horrors of that awful night.

The white cheeks glowed, the blue eyes were brilliant with fever, as their owner tossed about her couch,

crying aloud ever the same strange words :

“ The stable of Bethlehem ! the stable of Bethlehem ! Oh, how dark it is ! how cold it is ! Help, help, Lewis ! they have robbed me of my diamonds and my furs ! They have left me alone in the cold, dark stable of Bethlehem ! ”

If Arnold, the mulatto, could have stood that hour beside her bed of racking pain, and gazed upon the shattered wreck of the once proud and beautiful Margery Kenrick, even his desperate heart must have foregone any further satisfaction of his bitter revenge.

But Arnold would cross her path no more.

Far, far away, hours ahead of pursuit and detection, making the best

of their opportunities and their stolen treasures, the mulatto and his traveling companion (no other than his disguised wife Daphne) were afloat in a sailing-vessel from the nearest port, bound for foreign shores.

* * * * *

Late in the afternoon of that eventful day a tall, bearded man stole softly into the chamber where Margery Kenrick lay, with the ice-fillets bound about her burning brow.

The nurse and the superintendent stepped aside in mute sympathy into the outer corridor, and Dr. Kenrick bent alone over the suffering girl.

As he listened to her pitiful ravings, her hot hand clasped in his, his broad chest heaved, and his eyes ran over with tender tears.

He fell on his knees beside the bed,

and gave vent to his long pent-up emotion in a prayer of mingled thanksgiving and anguish.

Praise be to God ! the lost one was found ! But, alas, alas ! would the hungry grave even now yield up its threatened and trembling victim ?

* * * * *

Christmas Eve once more in the old, familiar sitting-room at Wylde-wood.

The crucifix upon its oaken shelf, the pure Madonna smiling down from her marble pedestal, and the gay canary singing among the flowers in the sunny bow-window—it is all more like a scene in June than December.

But beside the glowing grate stands the grandmother's high-backed chair.

Yes, *the grandmother*, for in her old-fashioned chair sits the dear, old,

brown-eyed lady in her muslin cap and dove-colored gown, and across her knee (as brown-eyed and cheerful as herself) lies her month-old grandson, a superb, rosy roll of a baby, crowing on its back at a stray sunbeam, and smiling like a cherub, as the ray flashes full upon grandma's glasses.

Close at hand, in her low sewing-chair, sits the young mother. Floy, the pretty quadroon, has just dropped on one knee beside her, seeking directions as to the mass of delicate white embroidery flung across her arm ; and as Margery Kenrick lifts her head to answer, we see what a charming change has come over that fair, distinguished face.

The proud blue eyes have grown soft and gentle. A tender meekness

hovers about the curves of the once haughty mouth, and over the whole face is shed the grace of Christian motherhood, giving it an indefinable likeness to the face of the Mother of all mothers throned upon the wall.

She wears no jewels, and her dress is a simple one of violet cashmere, for Margery Kenrick has profited well by the bitter lessons of the past.

Purified and refined by suffering, she has learned, at last, to seek the things that are above; and all her earthly joys are centred upon her duties to her husband and to her peaceful, happy household.

Now, as she dismisses Floy and the crowing baby to the nursery, the *portière* is lifted and the grateful husband and father enters.

He carries in his hands a large

morocco casket, and his brown eyes glow with tenderness as he lays it in Margery's lap.

“ Our Christmas offering, dearest,” he softly says ; “ our blessed *ex voto* for past and present blessings !”

And opening it, the sunlight blazes upon a magnificent golden chalice set with diamonds of the purest water.

Brighter than those jewels, purer, and far more precious in the sight of God than any gems of earth or sea, the contrite tears begin to shine upon Margery Kenrick's blushing cheeks.

“ Nay, weep not, my darling,” says her husband fondly ; “ but rather rejoice and smile.”

He draws her close to his side, and lays his hand in benediction upon her golden head :

“ The past is buried, love, with all

its bitterness and pain. The present is full of peace and radiant promise. And when, to-morrow, at our Christmas Mass of thanksgiving, the good priest raises aloft for the first time this jewel-studded chalice, what shall we say, my Margery, to the divine Babe of Bethlehem, for all His tender mercies ?”

“*Gloria in excelsis Deo !*” says the aged mother, her moist eyes raised in grateful reverence to heaven.

And slipping to her knees at her husband’s feet, her head bowed meekly on her folded hands, Margery Kenrick joyfully makes answer :

“*Et in terra pax hominibus bonæ voluntatis !*”

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS



00014738630

